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SOME COMMENTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CUSTOM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

ABSTRACT: Modern psychology has learned a great deal about those aspects of modern society which go contrary to the psychological needs of the individual. However, little is known about two important related concerns: (1) those aspects of modern society which *facilitate* personal growth and psychological health; and, (2) those psychological disorders which come about primarily because of unexamined rejection of societal norms.

A host of new psychological disorders is emerging which stem not from suppression of the individual by his society, but rather from the inability of the person to benefit from those aspects of society which have the potential to contribute to personal health. Our knowledge of psychological disorder will remain limited until we look at both sides of the coin. Thus far, no theoretical analysis of the growth-fostering aspects of society has been undertaken.

If the early tradition of psychological theory was guilty of over-stressing the importance of adjusting, blending, and fitting in with the dominant society, it has been countered by the various self-actualization, individual-centered psychologies of the past decade. Never in the history of psychology has there been such proliferation of writings which question the validity of normative (normal) behavior. Never has there been such stress on the extent to which group behavior and mass culture can go contrary to the full development of the individual

person. Never have societal institutions undergone such vivisectional scrutiny: the church has been declared obsolete since the death of God; schools have been described as old-age homes which transform normal, even bright children into useless and cynical bipeds; government is looked upon as Leviathan because of the public exposé of its corruption and non-virtue. Everywhere there abounds cynicism and skepticism concerning our social viability, our promise for an honest future. Among significant factions of the adolescent population there is an unconscious despair and bleakness stemming from the belief that to adjust to the mainstream is little more than a cop-out, a sell-out, a fake-out.

Conformity, convention, traditions, custom, each is having a tough go in the 70's, and every indication suggests the going will get tougher. In paradoxical fact, the general consensus is swelling such that soon the majority opinion will be that the norm is wrong — a mathematical contradiction which only a society undergoing a radical evaluation of its values could witness. Perhaps this paradoxical condition should be looked at a bit closer, examined a bit more rigorously, and deliberated upon a bit more reflectively. Perhaps it is time to re-assess the possibility that numerous conformist tendencies actually *accord with the fundamental needs* of the person, and that social convention frequently is the consequence of generations of trial and error and as such may accrue a certain "wisdom." It is likewise instructive to observe that *all* forms of conformity do not require selling one's individuality or surrendering to the merciless demands of the ominous other. (Is it not possible that a collective of free, healthy adults could reach consensus with regard to social rules, values, or mores?) It is also time to look at the possibility that certain kinds of "individualism" and "non-conformity" are unto themselves reflections of a meager or disturbed personality. On a larger, global scale it is necessary to evaluate the prospect that entire social movements share as their most common denominator a psychologically diminished and impoverished individual. It is also necessary to consider the extent to which the inability to understand the wisdom of "conformist" behavior may be a pervasive social defense mechanism (in the same way we are told that much of American society shares the cultural defense mechanism of emotional insulation, "future shock," or "de-personalization"!) which enhances the infantile aggrandizement of self, self-experience, and self-thrill. It is not necessary to claim all "socially acceptable" behavior is in the best interest of the individual (or society for that matter) to clinically scrutinize the pathological excess intrinsic to certain forms of counter-culture, certain forms of withdrawal, or certain forms of self-assertion.

Psychologists have not sufficiently pointed out that certain types of societal rejection produce in the individual far greater psychological disturbance than the original condition he was rejecting: drug abuse is one example where this frequently holds, but is a bit too sensational in several respects. Of greater concern is the life-style adopted by those who search for a way of life which will replace their present unfulfilling life space, which in actual fact leads them only

to a reduced ability to satisfy their deepest and most fundamental needs. Much more frequently than most of us are willing to acknowledge, this is the case with adolescent dropouts, counter-culture buffs, young marrieds, and a flock of others who through the tedious (and psychologically expensive) procedure of trial and error are discovering for themselves the "reasons" which validate at the human level numerous social customs and habits. The super-rationalist is discovering (to his bewilderment) that because a given social custom is not encased in a perfectly "rational" explanation does not mean it fails to serve a crucial psychological function. He is likewise learning that the function of social rules is often not to appease the power structure, but rather to cater to the fundamental need structure of the individual, and this quite obviously includes his personal, intimate, and existential requirements.

It is readily apparent that conformity has not been getting good press from psychological theory during the past decade. Erich Fromm continues to remind us that automaton conformity is one of our basic mechanisms of defending the self from feelings of loneliness, isolation, and non-relatedness. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche enthusiasts, which includes a goodly number today, habitually remind us that herd conformity and herd morality threaten our very existence and unless we begin to create a new brand of man (a super-type man) we are condemned to drown in our self-imposed psychological pollution. Maslow spoke about "diminished" man, "stunted" existence, and the small percent of today's population which can be considered "actualized." Sartre alludes to the bad-faith which consumes our times and how it can be alleviated only by greater authenticity. Royce announces that most of us are "encapsulated men" and Vance Packard has described how we get holes in our stomach from trying to be like our neighbors who also suffer from the same malady trying to be like us. Rollo May has brilliantly narrated our sexual inadequacies, reminding us of our tendency toward mechanization and depersonalization, demonstrating how our native propensity for love and compassion is rapidly dwindling away. Unconditional regard for the person brings out the best in man and it is because our society so lacks it that we suffer from varied psycho-social, existential dilemmas, announce Rogers and Jourard. And of course, it would be ludicrous to forget the grandfather of them all, Sigmund Freud, whose followers continue to remind us that social rules contradict both our psychological and our biological nature, fostering neurosis at best, and world war at worst. Each of these theorists has spawned a dozen social critics who, in one way or another, espouse the general preamble of their intellectual patrons. Paul Goodman, one of our more enduring and brilliant social critics, paints a bleak picture, suggesting that our brightest youth are turning against "dominant" (mainstream) society. (This was a penetrating observation when he made it over 20 years ago, but it is now accessible to anyone who has the patience to listen to rock music.)

The relationship between the positive and negative aspects of conformity is paradoxical. The message of most contemporary critics

of social custom is rather clear: they point out that there are aspects of mass-life which go contrary to the needs of private-life; to survive in mass-society usually requires a reduction of self as well as self-image; Western culture is experiencing a value crisis in which man himself more and more frequently gets short changed; mass-institutions (school, industry, military, church) conspire against (go contrary to) the demands of the existential individual, his inner core of experience and existence. All this is unmistakably clear to anyone who will drop his defenses and lift his reading level. That our work in remedying these ailments has just begun is obvious. And, much worse, if the job does not take on greater urgency, soon, man as we know him probably will be altered, bent, distorted, diminished, stunted, alienated, compromised, mechanized, and proselytized, just as our frontier intellectuals and anxiety-bound citizens are simultaneously predicting. Contemporary psychology would be remiss in its duties if it did not point out the extent to which modern society is thwarting certain dimensions of man's psychological nature. *However, in many respects, there has been an "overkill" of criticism, which has resulted in a total distrust of our social system, a complete loss of faith in the goodness or worthwhileness of modern living.* There has emerged among significant numbers of our people an intuitive disrespect (sometimes hatred) for our societal structure, its customs and mannerisms, its historical habits and cultural reflexes, its institutions, its professions, its charities, its idiosyncrasies. Our new-found knowledge of the genuine limitations and pathology of our society has so pre-occupied our thinking and experiencing that we have become oblivious, experientially immune to the substantive, growth-fostering realities which permeate our society. This is by no means an attempt to urge a Pollyannic obsession with the "beautiful" within our culture, it is merely an attempt to point out that our adolescent obsession with negatives has helped nurture a view of society which strips the individual of his need to understand his society as viable, worthwhile, and meaningful. It has inculcated modern man with undue guilt and apprehension and coerced him into an artificial, almost neurotic, nihilism. It has caused him to *distrust* (not merely question or criticize) the fundamental institutions of society; it has caused him to lose faith in the future, replacing it with a need for an over-stimulated present; it has helped nurture each individual's natural feelings of insecurity into disproportionate, frequently neurotic, fears of self and society; it has robbed man of the initiative to create community in a society rapidly experiencing its loss. This culture-wide reaction formation is the nucleus for a whole new spectrum of neurotic disorders for which we have but a modicum of sound information *or* theory. In its most elementary form, the issue is this: the tendency toward rejection of social norms has relieved modern man of several burdens and disorders; however, at the same time this same tendency has crippled him with new and novel disorders with which the individual, as well as contemporary psychology, are singularly ill-equipped to cope.

As a rule this paradoxical situation is not understood by youth who cry that tomorrow not only will never come, but may have already

gone; by politicians who claim corruption to be the nature of things; by teachers who reduce their inability to counter nihilism by making a virtue of articulating it; by advertisers who exploit the knowledge of man's weaknesses and limitations; by doomsday intellectuals who ridicule those who do other than sit around waiting for the merciful end; by shallow-men who idle away their conscious hours blending in, being harmonious and adjusted, turning green whenever they recline on a green carpet.

Nor is the fact that *certain* aspects of modern life are health-fostering fully understood by those who revel in the newly discovered deficiencies of human psyche and society. The health-fostering realities of contemporary society are certainly not comprehended by those who have their identity magnified by showering despair upon those for whom despair is little more than an abstraction; by those who conspire against that which is healthy in society; by those who, by having nothing have nothing to lose, assume everyone else to be equally emotionally poverty-stricken; by those who know only deficiency motives and not growth motives; by those whose potential for growth and greatness is paralyzed by shabby, awkward, and artificial views of human being and being human. The gamut has gone full swing and those philosophies originally developed to point out society's weaknesses, are now themselves, when carried to their extremes, a *source* of personal weakness and deficiency.

There are several questions which must be raised with regard to this issue. How many of us claim that mass-society works more against our psychological best interests than for them? Yet can a society, even a partially free one like ours, long endure when it denies the *basics* of human existence? (Can functionally antithetical forces survive forever?) Can a society preoccupied with conformity, self-feelings, inner-worries really be that bad off? Aren't these, as Maslow suggests, disorders of healthy groups? And when more "serious" problems arise don't the introspective maladies tend to be quickly forgotten, (or at least set aside)? Can a society so affluent that its youth have little do to but sit about reflecting on their historical trauma really be all that bad off? It's hard to say. Can a society survive in a manner most congenial with fundamental human needs without a good deal of what we casually call conformity? Is there less wisdom to the *normative* dictates of society than the collective individualization of the matter? Does the fact that a given concept has been time-tested for several generations have any influence on its probable utility? Or can viable solutions be as readily generated on short term bases with equal personal validity? Is our society, in actual fact, all that stifling when compared with other technological societies, or even primitive societies for that matter (it is widely known in anthropology that the smaller a society the greater the *premium on conformity* and blind acceptance of the norm)? Is conformity pathological because it requires individuals to do things against their inclinations? Or do we need *additional criteria* to talk about the pathology of conformity? When we isolate specific examples of pathological conformity should

this lead us to conclude that all forms of conformity are equally non-healthy or pathology-inducing? Is there even the slightest possibility that egocentric adolescents and hip post-adolescents really know less about the effective functioning of society than those who have been doing it since before they were born? All of these questions must be asked if we are to have a more global view of the issues which surround conformity. Maybe after asking them we shall concur with those who condemn our social customs and guidelines. But until we rigorously pursue these questions we shall not achieve the confidence which comes *only* from analyzing *thoroughly* both sides of an issue. This very thoroughness eludes many contemporary intellectuals, for they seem sufficiently pre-occupied with *proving* that society is contrary to their individuality that they fail to consider those parts of society which are conducive to the growth of person-as-person.

There also exists the tendency to confuse "conformity" with "tradition," despite the fact these are two independent (though interacting) realities. The increased sophistication of our knowledge concerning the growth-inhibiting aspects of blind conformity has become blurred by our reflex-like tendency to equate *custom longevity* (tradition) with *senseless imitation* (blind conformity). (Obviously one *can* imply the other; however, the penchant for definitionally equating the two is unjustified.) This intellectual error is endemic to particular subsets of our youth culture, and Fromm cautions us of the hazards implicit in it:

For many of the young generation who belittle the value of traditional thought, I should like to stress my conviction that even the most radical development must have its continuity with the past; that we cannot progress by throwing away the best achievements of the human mind — and that to be young is not enough (Fromm, 1968, p. 1).

Some questions which emerge from all this include the following: (1) Can society and its individual members experience greater illness as a result of a morbid preoccupation with its illness than that which is intrinsic to the illness in the first place? (2) Can *cynicism* toward the global society serve a similar defensive function to that which automaton conformity itself serves? (3) Can each person move himself as well as his society toward greater growth and actualization or is each of us at the mercy of historical forces and conditions? (4) When a society evolves to the point that it accumulates a good deal of insight into its own pathology and deficiency is it possible that it may become so pre-occupied with this pathology and deficiency that it loses perspective of the growth-fostering, need gratifying aspects inherent to that society? Does this sequence, in fact, typify one of the intellectual-emotional main currents of our time?

There are quite obviously at least two distinct variations of contemporary adjustment pathology: (1) Those anxieties and neuroses which evolve as a result of stifling basic inner human needs; from over-conforming and refusing to be an individual; from being non-authentic and dishonest; from repressions, inhibitions, and denial; from societal

suppression and dominance. These disorders can be categorized as *societal-induced*, and their proper solution depends upon changing certain social customs, habits, traditions, values, attitudes, mores, and morals. (2) A second general category of contemporary adjustment pathology encompasses those anxieties and neuroses which stem from an absence of personal-centeredness; from loss of faith in self and community; from boundless pessimism and free-floating cynicism; from the stultifying belief that everything is meaningless, counterfeit, or artificial; from the loss of self-love and self-pride which comes *not* from blindly conforming to the norm, but from the failure to recognize those things which are inherently worthy of self-investment. These are forms of disorder which may or may not be societal-induced. Their etiology may be rooted in the absence of adequate or proper teaching. These disorders *may* be symptomatic of a disturbed culture. On the other hand, it is possible that they are reflections of personal limitations and deficiencies which are scapegoated to the dominant society. This general category of psychological disturbance can be referred to as existential crises, but they cannot, with certainty, be attributed to societal deficiency.

The historical evolution of psychological thought now finds us in a position of considerable wisdom with regard to societal-induced forms of neuroses. However, our knowledge is quite meager about psychological disturbance which comes about chiefly because of personal value-deficiency. Before we become even more obsessed with reducing psychological disorder to deficient societal rules and customs we perhaps should take a step back and survey the possibility that society as a whole (and the customs which it embraces) is, in fact, much healthier than a significant portion of its members.

RESUME: La psychologie moderne nous a appris plusieurs choses concernant les aspects de la société qui vont à l'encontre des besoins psychologiques de l'individu. Toutefois, on sait peu de choses concernant deux dimensions importantes reliées à ce problème: (1) les aspects de la société moderne qui peuvent *faciliter* la croissance personnelle et la santé psychologique; et, (2) les perturbations psychologiques qui sont principalement attribuables à un rejet non fondé des normes sociales.

Il y a toute une gamme de malaises psychologiques qui ne résultent pas de la suppression de l'individu par la société, mais plutôt de l'incapacité de la personne à profiter des aspects de la société qui sont susceptibles de contribuer à sa santé personnelle. Notre connaissance des désordres psychologiques demeurera limitée tant et aussi longtemps que nous ne considérerons pas les deux côtés de la médaille. On n'a pas encore entrepris l'analyse théorique des aspects de la société qui peuvent favoriser la croissance des individus.

REFERENCE

- Fromm, E. *Revolution of hope: Toward a humanized technology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.